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PLANNING FOR LAOSI. Brief History of Military Developments in Laos (January 1968-September 1969)

A. The war in Laos has been, since 1963, one of position and maneuver. Since the time of the Geneva Agreements, Communists have controlled the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, the Plain of Jars in central north Laos, and the Ho Chi Minh trail area of southeastern Laos. The Royal Lao Government (RLG) has, more or less, controlled the remaining areas. The seesaw battles usually follow the seasonal cycles of the monsoon. In the dry season the North Vietnamese recover the areas they have lost to the RLG during the previous rainy season. Within the past two years the North Vietnamese have changed tactics. In the 1967/1968 dry season the Vietnamese took a key strategic town in north Laos. This military reversal left a demoralized and disorganized Royal Lao Army (RLA). Faced with a growing North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troop presence, the RLG became more concerned and the Meo irregulars undertook various tactical moves in late 1968 which failed. By late March 1969, the enemy had succeeded in overrunning a number of key defensive outposts and threatened the Meo base at Long Tieng. Increased enemy troop concentration appeared along the southwestern edges of the Plain of Jars and it became clear that the enemy intended a major move.

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Gen Vang Pao mounted another spoiling operation to reduce this pressure against the Long Tieng base, to blunt the enemy buildup and to force him to withdraw back to his bases in the Plain of Jars. In early May, the Meo captured the town of Xieng Khouangville and 5,000 tons of enemy supplies and ordnance. The enemy, nevertheless, continued to press his offensive to the west and captured the neutralist-held village of Muong Soui on 27 June. The North Vietnamese appeared to be heading for the Route 7/13 junction at Sala Phou Koun. Once this point was in his hands, the enemy could advance north towards Luang Prabang and south towards Vientiane City.

B. Vang Pao then planned another operation behind the enemy forces to cut Route 7 and the enemy's supply lines and to siphon off enemy troops from their drive to the west. Vang Pao's irregulars met incredibly little resistance and, for a variety of reasons (success of tactical air strikes, overextended lines of communication, unforecasted rains, and the audacity of Vang Pao's plan), the enemy withdrew across the plain in early September. Vang Pao occupied the Plain of Jars for the first time since 1964.

C. From interrogation of enemy prisoners

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intentions became somewhat clearer. Before Vang Pao's last offensive the enemy had intended to consolidate his positions along Route 7, wait for reinforcements, and then initiate the second stage of his offensive against the Meo base at Long Tieng and the Route 7/13 junction. As early as 19 August, preparations were being made in North Vietnam for troop deployment to North Laos. By mid-September, we had learned that some 12,000 NVA troops are now strung out along Route 7 in North Vietnam. The first units have apparently begun to enter Laos.

D. Enemy activity in south Laos remained unusually quiet during the past twelve months with the exception of the fall of a strategic RLA outpost, Thateng, which is north of the Bolovens Plateau. This outpost fell on 3 April 1969. RLA and paramilitary forces seized the initiative in the summer and on 7 September occupied Muong Phine which marked the deepest penetration to date (since the signing of the Geneva Agreements) of the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex. Although the enemy recaptured Muong Phine at the end of September, the paramilitary forces captured over 2,000 tons of enemy supplies and ordnance, and shepherded 2,300 refugees back to RLG refugee centers.

E. An additional threat which has developed in the past year has been the construction of a road by the Chinese from

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Ban Batene on the China border to Muong Sai in Laos. This road was developed apparently to link up with the North Vietnamese road from Dien Bien Phu. The Chinese Communists currently have approximately 6,000 personnel composed of engineers, coolie labor and armed security forces.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 October 1969

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Possible New Developments in Laos

I. PATTERNS OF COMMUNIST ACTIONS UNTIL NOW

1. From the Laos settlement of 1962 through 1967 the Communists acted with considerable restraint in Laos. If North Vietnamese forces were not withdrawn as required by the Geneva Accords, neither were they used to extend Communist control beyond the lines of 1962. Indeed, by the end of 1967, the Communists had suffered a net loss of territory and a considerable loss of population in the annual cycles of offensive and defensive actions.* On the political side, the Communists continued to pay lip service to the 1962 Geneva Agreements and

* RLG forces take the offensive during the rainy season (May to October) taking advantage of guerrilla tactics, air support, and Communist supply difficulties resulting from their dependence on truck movements from North Vietnam; the Communists normally resume offensive operations in the dry season (November to April).

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attendant arrangements which neutralized Laos and established a tripartite government -- rightist, neutralists, and the Communist Pathet Lao. These arrangements continued to be honored in principle despite the fact that the PL vacated their cabinet seats in April 1963 following the murder of a neutralist minister in Vientiane. Souvanna, the "neutralist" Prime Minister held these seats open and the PL's declared political aims never excluded an eventual restoration of the tripartite arrangements.

2. The most reasonable explanation for this pattern of Communist conduct seemed to be that Hanoi, which controls and supports the Pathet Lao, did not wish to take actions in Laos which might prejudice its priority effort in South Vietnam. While it continued to invest the resources necessary to preserve its territorial and political base in North Laos, it was restrained from pushing too hard by concern over possible US response -- particularly the chance of triggering US action to block the vital infiltration corridor running through the Laos Panhandle to South Vietnam.

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3. Since 1968, however, the Communists have been developing a tougher political and military line in Laos. In part this has been a reaction to government encroachments on communist centers of strength and the increasing scale and efficacy of US air and other support. But it has also taken place within the context of significant developments in the Vietnam situation and in US attitudes toward Southeast Asia. The Communist may now be moving to a new phase in their policy on Laos. We examine the evidence for this below.

4. Recent Military Developments. During 1968, Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese combat forces were increased by some 12,000 combat troops (9,000 NVA and 3,000 PL).^{*} This buildup was accompanied by a vigorous military campaign in January-June 1968 which administered a series of defeats to the RLG, adding up to the worst government setback since the precarious days of 1961 and 1962. The psychological impact was considerable and

* In late October 1968 our estimate of PL/NVA strength in Laos was about 98,000 (51,000 PL and 47,000 NVA) compared to about 72,000 the year before. Since then there has been little change in total strength estimates. However, better intelligence on the NVA 559th Group in the Laotian panhandle, which is concerned primarily with support of infiltration to South Vietnam, has added 10,000 troops to the estimate of NVA strength in Laos, now held at 56,000. This figure does not include the 12,000 NVA troops now moving on Route 7 toward Laos.

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there was a good deal of apprehension in Vientiane that the Communists would break out from the previous pattern of military action and push on to the Mekong. But this did not happen and the rainy season was relatively quiet on both sides.

5. During 1968-69 the actual fighting in Laos has increasingly been conducted by NVA troops on the Communist side and US supported guerrillas (mainly Vang Pao's Meo forces) on the other, with the Pathet Lao and regular FAR troops slipping more and more into peripheral roles. From November 1968 to May 1969 the military action alternated between Communist campaigns which took Site 36 (Na Khang) and other guerrilla positions north of the Plaine des Jarres, and preemptive operations by Vang Pao's guerrillas, including the occupation of Xieng Khouangville where large Communist supply caches were captured. In the end the Communists pressed their offensive and captured Muong Soui on 27 June, a good month into the rainy season. It appeared at the time that they might move on to the key junction of routes 7 and 13 at Sala Phou Koun, and from there, press north toward Luang Prabang, and south to take Vang Vieng in northern Vientiane Province.

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6. Perhaps to the surprise of the Communists, Vang Pao and his Meo guerrillas bounced back to launch a campaign into the Plaine des Jarres on 23 August. By mid-September these troops had taken the entire Plaine des Jarres, including Khang Khay, the town long considered an important Communist center, and had captured large caches of supplies. They had again occupied the town of Xieng Khouangville, and in the Ban Ban area had cut route 7, the main Communist supply route from North Vietnam. These unprecedented conquests by Vang Pao's troops were conducted, however, against strangely quiet opposition. Although there was occasional resistance, in most instances the towns occupied were abandoned and the three NVA regiments in the area appeared to be holed up in mountain strongpoints.

7. It has been suggested that the North Vietnamese were deliberately drawing Vang Pao's forces into a trap. We doubt this, principally because of the large amounts of Communist supplies exposed to capture. The price seems too high. While we have no conclusive evidence, it seems more likely that heavier than usual rains, very effective airstrikes, and the simple

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element of surprise were the main causes for the success. Moreover there are indications that some Communist units were suffering from illness, shortage of food and other supplies.

8. Nonetheless, we believe the Communists are preparing for significant offensive action and that it is likely to come shortly. Some 12,000 NVA troops, including possibly the entire 312th NVA Division, are estimated to be moving along route 7 in North Vietnam towards Laos and the Plaine des Jarres. The movement is unprecedented in several respects. It is the largest single NVA force ever to be moved into North Laos at one time; it is entering Laos earlier (in relation to the dry season) than normally; and it is the first large troop movement known to enter northern Laos via route 7.* Some evidence suggests that the movement of these forces was planned before Vang Pao's offensive, and therefore that Communist plans for the coming dry season were relatively ambitious in any case and not aimed merely at retrieving losses.

* The 316th NVA Division, hitherto the main source for NVA troops deployed in northern Laos, is based in Moc Chau in North Vietnam; hence the troops moved over route 68 into Sam Neua province, usually on foot.

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9. Recent Political Moves. In the summer of 1968, the Lao Communists began to develop a new line which would require a reorganization of the tripartite Lao Government (the Provisional Government of National Union) (PGNU) established in 1962. The Communist statement of 22 July 1968 and subsequent elaborations suggest that "current realities" require that Souvanna be considered a rightist, rather than a neutralist, in the tripartite formula. The Communists also labored to strengthen the credentials of their own "Patriotic Neutralist Forces". At the same time the Communists have been careful to reaffirm the overall validity of the 1962 agreements; they clearly do not wish to open up further international discussions on Laos -- at Paris or elsewhere. In effect, they appear to be aiming at altering the political content of the tripartite formula so as to obtain control in Vientiane and doing this in a manner to avoid interference by the outside interests represented by the Geneva conference.

10. On 23 June 1969, the same day the Communists attacked Muong Soui, the NLHS Central Committee published a lengthy and detailed account of the Communist version of the struggle in Laos, and a bitter denunciation of the Souvanna government and

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the US. While it is more explicit than ever about "the current realities", its attack on the present PGNU was so violent as to suggest to some observers that the NLHS may be having second thoughts about reconstituting it, and may instead be laying the basis for creating their own provisional government in Laos.

II. POSSIBLE COMMUNIST COURSES OF ACTION

11. The evidence suggests a vigorous Communist military campaign during the coming dry season in North Laos (November-April). At a minimum, such a campaign would probably be designed to regain lost territory in the Plaine des Jarres, reduce the number of guerrilla sites, and strengthen the Communist hold on the not too friendly population remaining in Pathet Lao areas. Similar military efforts are likely in the south in the contested areas of the Laotian Panhandle.

12. If the Communists confine themselves to such limited military efforts, it is possible that their offensive could be contained by RLG guerrilla and regular forces backed by strong US air support. However, given the appearance of fresh NVA troops, the battle exhaustion of Vang Pao's forces, and the ineffectiveness of regular Lao troops, the Communists could probably accomplish these objectives fairly early in the dry season.

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13. Their plans may call for more ambitious efforts to set the stage for a new and more favorable settlement in Laos. The Communists might still not wish to complicate the situation by moving past the 1962 cease-fire lines to any substantial extent. But even within these limits there is much ground to recover. Moreover, the Communists would be equally interested in the psychological effects on Vientiane, on the King in Luang Prabang, and on the US.

14. There are certain targets which may appear particularly important to the Communists. Aside from clearing the Plaine des Jarres, the Communists may attempt to eliminate Vang Pao as a serious military threat by taking his bases of Sam Thong and Long Tieng in Xieng Khouang Province. They might also move against Vang Vieng, the capital of the Souvanna neutralists, and install their own "Patriotic Neutralists Forces" there. This would buttress their claim that Souvanna and his neutralists have become "rightists", and that the Patriotic Neutralists Forces" should be recognized as the true neutralist representatives.

15. If the Communists went beyond Vang Vieng, they could, even without crossing the 1962 line, reach the Nam Lik River some 50 miles north of Vientiane. At this point, or before,

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they might issue new calls to Souvanna or the King to stop the US bombing in Laos. While continuing to denounce Souvanna, they have given various marks of respect to the King. They apparently hope that at the right time they can persuade him to convoke a new conference composed solely of indigenous Lactian elements. The aim would be to form a new coalition to replace the present one. A certain amount of military pressure around Luang Prabang might be used to "educate" the King.

16. But how far the Communists move depends not only on the resistance they encounter, but also on their reading of the situation in Vietnam and on the US posture generally in SEA. So far at least, Hanoi has kept its Laos policy subordinate to its action in Vietnam; it has not permitted its military efforts in Laos to exceed certain limits, nor has it tried to push the political situation in Laos in ways that would be viewed negatively by world opinion and thus prejudice its options in South Vietnam. To destroy the "coalition" formula in Laos by military action would greatly prejudice the application of a similar formula in South Vietnam.

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17. But these considerations could be losing some weight.

The reduction in the NVA effort in South Vietnam may not only permit greater military efforts in Laos, but Hanoi may also consider that American distaste for involvement in Southeast Asia is now so strong that a crisis in Laos would only add to the pressures for the US to get out of both South Vietnam and Laos, perhaps even in a precipitate manner without a face-saving political settlement. If this is Hanoi's goal now, it might also push a campaign in central and southern Laos to capture the Mekong Valley towns. It might believe that this development would so depress, dispirit, and disillusion the US public that the pressures against the government to make peace at any price in Vietnam would become compelling on the President.

18. On balance however we think the risks involved will make Hanoi proceed with some caution. After all, the US bombing in Laos has been growing, not diminishing, and Hanoi's situation on the ground in South Vietnam is continuing to deteriorate. Hanoi has been reducing its burden in South Vietnam for the past year due in part at least to the cumulative strains of the war. In this context it would seem adventurous to base major moves in Laos on estimates about US reactions which might in the end prove wrong and costly.

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19. Moreover, so long as the Communists do not wish to break the situation wide open in Laos there is another danger in excessive military action. The RLG is a rather fragile vessel; its forces might crumble under pressure, panic could easily grip Vientiane, and the RLG could fall apart as some leaders left the country and others bickered over the proper course to cope with the crises. The Communists could find that they had produced an unwanted effect -- the collapse of Souvanna's cabinet and its replacement by a military "strong-man" who would advocate direct US and Thai involvement to defend the Mekong Valley.

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III. POSITIONS OF OTHER POWERS

20. The Soviet role in all this is highly ambiguous. As the leaders of the Communist movement they are more or less obliged to support the objectives of Hanoi and the Pathet Lao. At the same time the USSR shared responsibility for the formula of a neutralist tripartite government, and Souvanna Phouma had Soviet approval as Prime Minister under this formula. To some

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extent, therefore, Soviet prestige requires preservation of the formalities of the 1962 agreements. Beyond this the preservation of a neutral Laos may offer a better vehicle for the promotion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia than would be the case if Laos were a totally Communist state. On the other hand, it is very doubtful that the Soviets could or would take effective action to alter Hanoi's course in Laos, however awkward it might be for the USSR, if Hanoi was determined upon it.

21. The Chinese Communists have a physical presence in northern Laos where their road building activities are a matter of concern in connection with the insurgency in Thailand. This presence may be viewed by Hanoi as having some deterrent value against US intervention, but this seems marginal because the Chinese are in regions remote from the centers of military action. Short of an agreement between Hanoi and Peking to coordinate efforts for intensified and protracted guerrilla warfare throughout Indochina and Thailand, we doubt that the Chinese constitute an important factor in Hanoi's policy decisions on Laos.

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22. Hanoi must also consider possible Thai reactions to more aggressive Communist moves in Laos. Though Thailand has all the ingredients to make it the peninsula's strongest power, it does not have at this moment, and probably will not in the foreseeable future, the military wherewithal to operate effectively in Laos. It is probably because they have counted on the US to use its own military power in Laos in case of need that the Thai have done so little in support of their interests there. Nevertheless, we doubt that Hanoi dismisses Thailand's potential completely when considering its policy in Laos. North Vietnam is still a small country and common sense would suggest not becoming too provocative in too many directions at the same time.

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